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The Eco-Human Crisis: Interfaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility
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It is with a certain fear and trembling that I stand here today, in this historic citadel of learning, where argumentation has a tradition of well-fashioned complexity and razor-sharp criticism: for the thesis I want to propose to you is quite simple and, I suspect, controversial: that global responsibility can serve as the common ground for interfaith dialogue. That's a rather simple assertion, which is based on another simple, though frightening, reality: given the degree of suffering that pervades and tortures our world today - human suffering due to the way some humans are treating other humans and ecological suffering due to the way humans are treating the planet - we face a crisis such as our species and the planet have never before faced. It is a crisis that threatens not only life as it exists but also life as it will exist.

The thesis I put before you today is that this eco-human crisis - and the suffering that propels the crisis - must be not only a central concern for each religious tradition and community individually: it must also be a central concern in the religions efforts to understand each other. The crisis is such that its resolution demands the contribution and co-operation of all religious communities. All the individual religions bear a shared global responsibility. Global responsibility - i.e. a responsibility to do something about the eco-human suffering that is causing global crises can and must become the common ground, the common starting point and context, the global commons for interreligious discourse. With global responsibility as the arena for inter-faith discourse, I suspect that the religions will not only be able to contribute to resolving our global crises, but they will also be able to understand, learn from, and enhance each other as never before. Global responsibility can provide a new hermeneutical context in which religions can better grasp their differences and make something positive out of those differences. An alternate title for this paper might be: 'Global Responsibility and the Hermeneutical Circle for Interfaith Dialogue.

But I tremblingly realize that such claims are highly controversial. Most of the controversy and criticism will come from what, for lack of better term, we can call 'postmodern consciousness.' It's an awareness that pervades the way many people see the world, especially those people who look at the world from the citadels of academia. Among the many and divergent characteristics of a postmodern perspective, one is particularly pivotal: what I term 'the dominance of diversity.' Peoples, nations, religions are delightfully, but also incorrigibly, diverse. Postmodernists insist that we are more different than we are alike. Every way of perceiving the world and of making truth claims about the way things are is 'socially constructed': and that means different from every other of the myriad socio-cultural constructions. Each of us is fenced in by his/her socially-constructed way of looking at things; and though we can compare ends, and talk a bit over the top of them, we can never remove them and imagine that we can construct a common neighborhood in which we can all see things the same way.

Therefore, when I suggest today that all the religions can meet and start talking on the common ground of global responsibility, many will object that such responsibility will necessarily be overruled or dominated by the diversity of the religions. The particularities of diversity win out over the singularity of responsibility. Indeed, such critics will sound the warning that such proposals as I am making - for a global responsibility that searches for a global ethics - can easily lead to - or are camouflaged forms of - 'cultural imperialism,' or 'totalizing tactics' aimed at imposing one's own perspective on others.

My purpose today is not to advance a counter-argument to such postmodern criticisms. I have tried to do something like that elsewhere (in a book that just came out), but honestly, I wonder whether such theoretical debates about the incommensurability of the common core of religions really get us anywhere (besides fostering the tenure or promotion of academics). What I'd like to do in this evening's discussion is something more practical. In light of what may (I would like to say 'most') people in different cultures and religions recognize as the present eco-human crisis, I would like to lay out and recommend some procedures or steps for inter-faith encounters. It's my suggestion - coming from my socially constructed perspectives as a white, male, middle-class Christian academic - for an interreligious coming together that will be globally responsible. I honestly think - or, I profoundly hope - that there will be many, maybe a majority, of persons from the different religious communities of our world that would agree, basically, that these procedures are acceptable and promising. If they do, then that's my response to the postmodern criticism!

Dialogue is a 'second step'

In proposing these practical guidelines for interreligious dialogue, I am, admittedly, taking the essentials of one particular method and suggesting that it has a universal validity and applicability. Not surprisingly, that method is drawn from my own cultural and religious background. I would like to suggest that the essential ingredients of the methodology of liberation theology can be profitably and appropriately adjusted and applied as a methodology of interfaith dialogue. My suspicion is that this 'liberative method,' though elaborated within a Christian context, is not at all limited to that context. As the Zen Buddhists like to say about their own spiritual practices, this liberation method is not restricted to one religion but has universal relevance.

The kernel or distinctive ingredient to such a liberative (or globally responsible) method of dialogue is contained in the liberation theologians' crisp announcement: 'Theology is always a second step.' [1] Applied to the interfaith context, *dialogue* (as usually understood) *is always a second step* . I strongly suspect that what liberation theologians have discovered in their *Sitz im Leben* can have similar relevance for the *Sitz im Leben* of inter-faith dialogue; liberation theologians, in their concrete situations of exploitation and poverty, have found that to use their actual struggles for justice as the lens with which to 'reread' or 'rehear' their Scriptures and traditions has enabled them to see and hear things that were previously hidden from them. Praxis not only guides but reveals understanding; active, committed involvement with struggles for eco-human well-being and justice does something to one's powers of perception. Thus, in the words of Dermot Lane, this 'pre-theological' or 'prereflective commitment to the praxis of liberation is something that precedes theological reflection, becomes the object of theological reflection, and judges theological reflection... This praxis of liberation both as a point of departure and as an ongoing reality becomes foundational for the whole of liberation theology.' [2] Take the previous citation, read 'dialogue' instead of 'theology,' and you have the core of a globally responsible method for dialogue. Without limiting this priority of praxis to a simplistic, chronological interpretation, this method urges that all our efforts at 'dialoguing' or understanding each other be preceded, or accompanied, or pervaded by some form of shared practical efforts to remove eco-human suffering. This is the lynchpin, or springboard, for a globally responsible method of dialogue: participants in the dialogue do not begin with conversations about doctrines or rituals, not even with prayer or meditation (even though such academic or mystical undertakings are integral components of all multifaith dialogue). Rather, the encounter begins, or people first meet each other, on the level of some form of liberative, engaged praxis.

Together, they determine what are, in their particular social or national context, the examples of human or ecological suffering that they as human and religious persons feel called upon to address. And together they attempt to do something about these pressing realities of poverty or hunger or exploitation or environmental devastation. From this effort, even though it will be complex and perhaps unsuccessful, even though the effort will admit of different analyses and remedies, there will result a context, or an atmosphere, or a new sensitivity, on the basis of which the participants in the dialogue will be able to understand themselves and each other in new ways. As Samuel Rayan S.J., from his own experience of such multi-religious efforts at human betterment in India, described it: 'In the process of a liberating, whole-making collaboration with God and neighbor, the different spiritualities will progressively discover one another, discover themselves with their weaknesses and strengths, and encounter more intimately the Mystery they bear, symbolize, and convey.' [3]

The hermeneutical circle of dialogue

But let me try to be more precise, more practical, and I hope more persuasive. I would like to outline the components, or steps, which I think are integral to a globally responsible way of dialogue that integrates praxis into conversation. What these steps represent, I suspect, is a smoother and more effective turning of the 'hermeneutical circle' - that process by which we move out from our limited horizons to understand or interpret a text, a person, or a culture that has not been within the horizon of our comprehension. (Such texts, of course, can be those of our own culture and religion.) The movements of this circle - or the spokes of this wheel - have been variously described, usually in pairs: praxis and theory, experience and reflection, identity and otherness. In the globally responsible method I am proposing, the hermeneutical wheel turns on four spokes, or four movements, that constantly support and call for each other. In all of them, the 'interpreter' or searcher for truth is called out of herself: she is never alone: the act of understanding is always an act that involves one with 'an-other.' Thus, all of the words describing these four spokes begin with the Anglicized forms of the Latin prefix or preposition 'cum' ('with'): Com-passion, Con-version, Col-laboration, Com-prehension. Again, I describe these four spokes or steps in the hope that persons of other religions will find them compatible with their religious convictions and consistent with what they see in the world around them.

1. Compassion: This is the 'condition of the possibility' for the kind of globally responsible dialogue I am urging. This is the first movement toward such an encounter among persons of differing religious communities - unless they all, from their varied perspectives and for their varied reasons, *feel compassion* for those who are

suffering or the anguishing earth, the kind of dialogue I am talking about will not take place. The first movement or impetus for this kind of dialogue is a feeling for others, or a suffering with them (the literal meaning of the Latin *compatire*.) I am not saying that all persons feel such compassionate responses to suffering or victimization; to make such a claim would be naively to ignore what Christians call the reality of sin or what Buddhists see as ignorance. But there are many people who *do* feel compassion; they find it arising out of their humanity and out of their religious experience and convictions.

Such persons, in feeling such a compassionate connectedness, will find themselves linked in a twofold direction; not only with those who are the victims but also with other persons who find themselves responding with similar compassion. Here we have the first seeds of what Michael Amaladoss called 'the principle of unity' among the participants in dialogue. [4] The compassion I feel wants to join with the compassion you feel: compassion makes us brother and sister to each other: in a strange paradoxical fashion, the reality of victims and of suffering, calls us to community and to dialogue.

I make this suggestion that compassion for the suffering be the first movement of interreligious encounter on the basis of a presupposition a presupposition, however, grounded in what I have witnessed in people of varying cultures and religions. I am presupposing that there is something about the way we humans are put together that moves many persons (certainly not all) in all cultural-religious contexts to respond with compassion in the face of the needless and unjust suffering of others. Edward Schillebeeckx helps me articulate which I'm trying to get at with his notion of 'negative experiences' such as suffering due to injustice, human beings from differing cultural backgrounds find themselves reacting in similar ways: they feel compelled to pronounce a spontaneous, resolute 'no' to such situations. The 'no,' with similar spontaneity, leads to an equally resolute 'yes' to how the situation might be addressed and changed.

The shared compassion I am talking about is found in such 'negative experiences of contrast' in which we find ourselves shouting 'no' and then searching for a 'yes.' For Schillebeeckx, such experiences are 'pre-religious experiences.' They are:

> ...important human experiences, namely negative experiences of contrast: they form a basic human experience which as such I regard as pre-religious experience and thus a basic experience accessible to all human beings, namely that of a 'no' to the world as it is... The fundamental human 'no' to evil discloses an unfulfilled and thus 'open yes' which is as intractable as the human 'no,' indeed even stronger, because the 'open yes' is the basis of that opposition and makes it possible... Both believers and agnostics come together in this experience. That is also a rational basis for solidarity between all peoples (we can add, all religions) and for common commitment to a better world with a human face. [5]

Such solidarity I am suggesting, begins with compassion - with the feelings that a Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jew will share when they stand together before a starving child, a butchering death-squad, a river rancid with pollution.

2. Conversion: To feel with and for others who are suffering, if the feelings are deep and genuine, is to be claimed by them. They not only touch our sensibilities, they call forth our response. Truly to feel compassion is to be *converted*; it is to experience that one's life is turned around, changed. Compassion makes demands. We can no longer live the way we did before we felt this compassion. And once again, to experience such a 'turning around' and the 'calling' that it contains is to be 'turned toward' and 'called with' other people who have had the same kind of experience. One wants to join with others who have also experienced such conversion; there is no talk yet of what to do or of any common plans and projects; there is, at this stage, just the common conversion, the common calling to do something about suffering or injustice that brings people together.

But it is a shared conversion. And when such conversion takes place, when compassion leads to the turning-around of one's life to act on behalf of others, when one finds oneself committed to a globally responsible life - I think we can call such conversion 'religious.' What Schillebeeckx was suggesting with his notion of 'pre-religious' experiences, I find confirmed by my own religious perspective: such an experience of being so deeply touched and turned by the plight of another human or sentient being both looks and feels like what I would call the action of the Spirit (or the reality of the interconnected *Dharma*). But whether one terms this kind of conversion to victims a religious experience or not, the practical effects are the same: one finds oneself responding to a situation that one wants to change or ameliorate and in doing this, one looks for others who are also seeking similar responses.

Thus, in the first meetings of a globally responsible dialogue, persons of different faith communities will talk about how they have felt compassion for and how they feel converted to victims of eco-human injustice or suffering - or how they themselves have been such victims. This makes for a genuine coming together - a meeting of minds and hearts: to tell each other how and why we feel called upon to do something about the malnutrition in the village, the lack of medicine or schools, the expropriation of land, the devastation of the forests. In a globally responsible dialogue, we first *feel* together, we first cry together, and hope together. Such shared conversion experiences can be just as effective as - maybe more effective than - the shared religious experiences we can have through meditation or ritual. There is an existential, human bondedness already alive and active before we actually speak to each other as religious persons.

Indeed, to describe what I see taking place at this stage of the encounter, I would use a term that I first encountered years back during my seminary days at the Gregorian University in Rome: What is going on in these stages of compassion and conversion is a genuine ' *communication in sacris* ' - a communication in the Sacred. In responding to the needs of others, we are feeling and responding to what I would call the Other; we are responding to something for which religious language and symbol is appropriate. And we are doing this *together* - we are communing together. If we hear much talk nowadays about basing interreligious dialogue on shared *mystical* experiences, I think that compassion for and conversion to the suffering victims of our world may be just as effective, if not a more effective, means of getting at that experience than shared prayer, meditation, and ritual. There can be an interreligious communing in the Sacred not just through contemplation but also through action.

3. Collaboration; Such compassion for the suffering and conversion to their cause naturally and necessarily lead to action. Having been so-called by the same concerns of suffering due to injustice, members of different religious communities will also feel themselves called to *co-labor* - to act together in doing something about the reality of suffering. Here we arrive at the heart of the liberative praxis that will tighten the existential, human ties between persons of very different religious backgrounds. First, this praxis will require that after having agreed on what are the common problems they want to address, participants in dialogue seek to identify and understand the origin or causes of such problems. This will call for some kind of share socio-economic analysis. Admittedly, this is where the diversity of religious perspectives will come into play; there will most likely be no one analysis of the cause of the suffering and oppression and therefore no one program or plan for its solution. Such diversity of analyses and such a storehouse of remedies is precisely the richness that the diversity of religions brings to the task of saving our planet.

That this diversity of analyses and proposed solutions will lead to collaboration rather than division is something that must be worked at especially during this first 'practical' stage of the dialogue. Hope that such efforts will bear the fruit of solidarity and collaborative efforts is based on two other integral ingredients to a globally responsible dialogue:

a) All such efforts to truly listen to each other's analyses and proposals will be rooted in and nurtured by compassion for the suffering; thus, the dominant concern that guides such discussions is not the desire to promote one's own agenda or religious convictions but to remove the suffering and remedy the situation. Our conversion to the well-being of this earth and its victims will enable us both to speak our mind boldly but also to step back in order to listen and try new ideas and tactics.

b) But more effectively, our multi-religious efforts to build collaboration out of our differing analyses and plans can be guided and kept in check if all the participants in dialogue might agree on what can be called 'the hermeneutical privilege' or the 'epistemological priority' of the victims and the struggling poor. Such a 'privilege' or 'priority' recognizes that in the way the world generally functions, the marginalized and the disenfranchised have not had a voice in the deliberations on what needs to be done to promote human and ecological well-being. Now we of the so-called developing nations admit that their voice and their experience must be heard - not as an exclusive word, but as a privileged word. It is especially in determining the sources or causes of global suffering and the needed remedies for this suffering that they must be listened to and must occupy a privileged place in our deliberations and analyses. So it will be the victims themselves whom we theologians and religious leaders must listen to first, they who will, as it were, arbitrate between the differing contributions made by the differing religious communities. A liberative praxis means identifying with and learning from those who are the primary victims of injustice. It is especially the victims who will be the interpreters or the 'hermeneutical bridges' that will enable persons of diverse religious experience and beliefs to listen to and understand each other.

And so, on the basis of a richly diverse yet unified analysis of the causes of suffering, always acting *with* and not just *for* the marginalized, this interreligious community of praxis will *act together* for justice, for peace, for

ecological sustainability - in whatever concrete ways they have agreed upon in their particular situations. This acting together will gather the different religious communities all the more into a common community of shared courage, frustration, anger, anguish; it will bring them together in a shared experience of fear, of danger, perhaps of imprisonment and even martyrdom. It will also bond them in shared success and joy in bringing about change and in transforming structures of oppression and suffering into communities of justice, co-operation, unity. Such shared experiences, arising out of a shared liberative, transformative praxis, will enable persons of differing religions to be and feel themselves together as co-workers and as friends in a deeply human way. To work and suffer together, to fail and succeed together, is togetherness that transcends culture and language and religion.

4. Comprehension; And therefore such practical-personal, togetherness, opens the doors to *religious* togetherness. Having co-suffered (compassion with the suffering and con-verged (conversion) in response to their plight: having co-labored with and for them, religious persons can begin - will feel called to begin - the task of co-prehending or understanding each other. Under the momentum - the natural movement I would say - of praxis, the hermeneutical circle now moves to reflection, discussion, study, prayer, meditation. But all these efforts to share and understand on the religious level will take place in the same area that compassion and conversion and collaboration were felt and lived out: *together*. Such pursuits will *not* be confined to where they traditionally have been carried out: back home, in one's own temple or church or mosque. Rather religious persons who have acted together will now speak and witness religiously together. Buddhists and Christians and Muslims - having acted and suffered together, having been called together in a new way by the victims of this earth - will now reflect and talk together about their religious convictions and motivations. Now they will attempt to "rehear" or "re-view" their scriptures and beliefs and stories and explain not only to themselves but to others what it is that animates and guides and sustains their compassion, their conversion, their collaboration for eco-human well-being.

As Edward Schillebeeckx sees it, this is a new form of ecumenism: '...(A) common concern in solidarity for the poor and oppressed reunite men and women in the '*ecumene of suffering humanity* ' and this action in solidarity can then bring us back to theory; in other words, through orthopraxis we can again confess and express in new words an authentic and living orthodoxy.' [6] This will be an orthodoxy that is made intelligible and shared with members of other traditions - a shared orthopraxis, as it were, leading to a communication between orthodoxies. In other words, what I am envisioning here is an interreligious renewal analogous to the Christian ecclesial renewal experienced by many Christian communities who have followed a pastoral program inspired by liberation theology. When religious persons reflect on their religious heritage on the basis of a praxis of commitment of or to the poor and oppressed, they find themselves 'bringing forth new treasures' from old treasures; they see and hear and understand their own *and* each other's scriptures and belief with new eyes and new heart.

For example, having heard and actually seen how the Four Noble Truths or the nirvanic experience of *pratitya-samutpada* are enabling and directing Buddhist partners in the transformation of village life in Sri Lanka, Christians can come to appreciate and appropriate such beliefs/ experiences in genuinely new and fruitful ways. And Buddhists will be able to grasp better the Christian belief in the Reign of God or in the resurrection of Jesus having witnessed how such visions of the future and such a sense of the living Christ have inspired Christians in their efforts to transform society and never give up hope. In the United States, it has been the shared commitment of Christians with Native Americans to save the earth from technological and consumerist devastation that has enabled Christians as never before to grasp and learn from the world-affirming Native American spirituality.

We have already begun to catch glimpses of the fruits of comprehension and mutual religious enrichment that can grow from the tree of shared interreligious globally responsible praxis. For me, the following claim of John Gort is not at all exaggerated or naive: 'Joint interreligious praxis among and on behalf of the poor will yield not only the enhancement of a greater measure of justice but also an increase of communication and understanding. It is in the crucible of praxis and solidarity that religious beliefs, perceptions, experiences are tested and given deeper and broader meaning and context.' [7]

Base human communities

Implied in what I have been urging so far is that such liberative, globally responsible dialogue can take place only in a *community* . This kind of interreligious encounter cannot take form it carried out by people who come together for a weekend at a dialogue center or university. A dialogue that begins with, or essentially includes, some form of liberative praxis must be realized in a community of people who are coming together to act and

analyze. Thus, there have been many, especially in Asia, who are urging that interreligious dialogue be carried out especially (not exclusively) in what are being called *base human communities*.

The model here is that of the Base Christian Communities that have sprung up throughout Latin America and have proven to be transformative of both church and society. In a multi-religious context, the model must be expanded and adjusted. The formative nucleus remains the same: the resolve to make critical, transformative links between religious values and the sufferings due to eco-human injustice. Basic communities of this type gather in order first to recognize and analyze their situations of exploitation or marginalization and then to ask how these realities can be brought into a critical, life-giving conversation with the religious convictions represented in the group.

In the age-old multireligious reality of Asia, and in the brewing multireligious context of Europe and North America, there is the growing sense that what has been done so productively in Christian communities can be done also in multi-faith communities. When the 'many poor' realize that they also represent the 'many religions,' such base human communities begin to grow. They are grounded in the common kunlan problems facing the followers of all the religions of a particular location. Speaking from his multi-religious and multi-growing 'dialogue of life and development with justice' is bringing BCC's (Basic Christian Communities) to become 'BHC's' (Base Human Communities). [8]

In their practical functioning, such BHCs are no different from BCCs: they begin with discussion of where they and their communities are hurting; they listen to each other's stories of discrimination, lack of medical care or education, abuse by government or local powers. They will talk also about their efforts to work together, about what has or has not been effective, about how they have hoped and suffered together. And then will come the distinctive difference in these base human communities. Felix Wilred, from his experience with such communities in India, describes the multi-religious sharing and communication that contribute to the identity and strength of these groups:

The religious experience of the followers of various religions will go to reinforcing the bond of unity and lead to concrete projects for transforming society. Common readings from the Koran, Gita, Bible, Dharmapada, Buddha, etc. will form a regular feature of these communities... (they operate) for the cause of workers, peasants, especially of the unorganized sector, for the defense of the dignity and rights of women, tribals, etc. The spirit and tradition of each religion on these questions could be brought to bear for joint action and furnish deeper motivations... One should not think of these communities as merely experimental or exceptional; they should become widespread and common in Asia. [9]

We can hope that the experience that Aloysius Pieris has had in his base human communities of Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka will be multiplied throughout the world: 'Here (in these BHCs), co-pilgrims expound their respective scriptures, retelling the story of jesus and Gautama in a core-to-core dialogue that makes their hearts bum (Luke 24.32)." [10]

To oppose without excluding

But hearts will not always bum in unison and collaboration. That would be to paint a much too rosy picture of globally responsive dialogue. Precisely because the stakes are so high in the common concern for eco-human justice - life or death for persons or planet - participants in such a dialogue are going to be much more involved and passionate than if, say, they were discussing their different views on the nature of angels or afterlife. As already recognized, in a liberative dialogue, although the problem that everyone recognizes is one, the solution is not. There will be a splash of differing diagnoses and remedies for the one problem. And while we are hoping that for the most part this diversity will spawn complementarity, this will not always be the case. Differences will sometimes make for contradictions, and that means disagreements. And because the subject matter of the disagreements are life and death issues, differences will also lead to opposition and resistance. More painfully, I may find your religion's analysis and solution for our common problem to be not only incomplete or incoherent or ineffective; I may also find it *intolerable*. My voiced ‘no' will call me to some form of practical opposition.

And this is where a globally responsible dialogue or a base human community can not only fall apart; it can explode. In a very practical way, we are facing the question that Alasdair MacIntyre posed for any globally responsible dialogue: 'Whose justice are we talking about? Whose justice will take precedence?' [11] And if 1 not only find your justice incorrect but intolerable, then your justice has become for me an injustice. Miroslav Volf, who has witnessed the clash of religious justices in his former Yugoslavia, states the danger disturbingly: 'When competing accounts of justice clash, one person's justice becomes another person's barbarity. And when

one person's justice is another person's barbarity, society sinks into bloody chaos. Is there a way out? Only if we can end the struggle of justice against justice.' [l2]

Volf offers some helpful, though difficult, advice on how we can find a way out of the clash of justice against justice. He proposes that if your liberative dialogues on eco-human justice are seen only in terms of 'oppression vs liberation,' we all too easily can end up at each other's throats. We must also see our difficult dialogues in the framework of 'exclusion vs embrace.' The torrent of suffering enveloping so much of our globe today originates fundamentally, according to Volf, from a special kind of oppression called exclusion. We cut ourselves off from each other; we pin our well being only on our own selves; we think that we can simple 'be' and forget that we can only 'be with.' Thus, true, lasting wellbeing can come not simply through liberation and the providing of civil and economic rights (as essential as these goals may be); well-being will depend on a hue embrace of the other, on making room for them precisely in their otherness and difference from, or even opposition to, us. [13]

Volf spells out what this means for a globally responsible dialogue: 'We cannot expect to agree on justice if we are not ready to distance ourselves from ourselves and make space within ourselves for the other. There can be no justice without the will to embrace the other, just as there can be no genuine embrace without justice.' [14] This means that even when we are in disagreement over our notions of justice, even then I will resist in a way in which *I do not simply exclude you*. I still try to maintain our connectedness; I still am open to carrying on a further conversation, even in the act of resisting. This is not easy. It is really at the heart of Gandhi's and Martin Luther King's non-violent movement of resistance; they struggled resolutely against what they felt were intolerably oppressive systems; and yet they did so in a way in which they never excluded their opponents as an enemy; those with whom they differed were still others, with whom they hoped to nurture a dialogue.

To embrace and practice this paradox of resisting and embracing at the same time will require, further, that all participants in a globally responsible dialogue try to follow what Volf calls 'enlarged thinking. Drawing on perspectives from Hannah Arendt [15] and Seyla Benhabib, [16] Volf urges an attitude that I see as part of the very life-blood and success for a globally responsible dialogue among religious persons: even when we are convinced to our core that our program of eco-human justice is correct, even when we are convinced that we must resist the program of the other, we must do so out of the realization that such convictions are only part of the picture, that there is always room for further vision, even for unexpected moderation and correction. We must always be ready to expand our thinking, yes even our moral convictions. So even when we oppose the other, we must at the same time embrace the other; in resisting, we must also listen; in standing firm, we must be ready, also, to change.

> ... we can enrich and correct our convictions about justice by engaging in the exercise of 'enlarged thinking' in encounter with those who do not belong to our tradition - by letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we might be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from their perspective, by readjusting our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives. As we open ourselves for each other's perspectives, we can hope that competing justices will become converging justices. [17]

To be as deeply committed to our programs for eco-human justice as we are genuinely open to modify and redirect those programs in the light of what we can learn from others - this is to work with eco-human justice as a *relative absolute criterion*. Because we feel an *absolute* commitment to what we see as the *requirements* for eco-human well-being, we are ready to *oppose* all that would endanger this vision; but because we know that our visions are always *relative* and limited, we will never simply *exclude* what we are opposing. Again, we are walking the razor edge of paradox: to oppose and yet also to embrace.

Non-violence and the privileged voice of the victims

This ideal of adhering to eco-human justice as a *relative-absolute* norm, this determination to embrace whatever we have to oppose, is difficult and elusive. To help make it more of a practical possibility, I offer two further suggestions or guidelines for how such a paradoxical policy can be affirmed and practised in a globally responsible dialogue:

a) What was said earlier about the hermeneutical privilege of the victims has a very concrete, practical role to play in helping us determine or feel when our positions are to stand firm in their absolute convictions and when they are to open to others in their awareness of relativity - or, when we are to resist and when we are to embrace. Here is where the victims of eco-human injustice, or those who are suffering most, must carry out their privileged, mediating role in a liberative dialogue. It is they who will help us know whether our programs for

promoting well-being or removing justice are 'true' or adequate - how well these programs or beliefs actually work. It is the victims who will help us open ourselves to seeing the liberative, transformative content and power of beliefs or practices which we have never considered or which seem from our isolated perspective to be oppressive. If all religious participants in the dialogue are primarily listening to those who are most in need of liberation and transformation, if these victims are thoroughly part of both the liberative praxis and the religious reflection that make up a globally responsible dialogue, then the religious communities will be better able to listen to each other.

Any attempts to take 'absolute' positions or to oppose the programs or claims of others will have to have, as it were, the seal of approval from the victims and the oppressed. Where that approval is lacking, where the oppressed are raising further questions or caveats - there is a signal that one's supposed absolute stance must be relativized through more authentic listening to the others. The balance or rhythm of absolute-relative norms, or of full commitment and full openness, will be guided by the experiences and voices of the victims.

b) Also, and just as importantly, if eco-human well-being is to serve as a relative-absolute norm within a interreligious dialogue, it can do so only if the dialogue is always *non-violent*. Non-violence is a practical means indeed, it is the expression - of living out our relative-absolute commitment to global responsibility. 'The ability to stand for the truth as one sees it in the realm of experience and action in such a way, however, that one's own view is always open to correction and thus to place one's own existence at stake - is possibly only as nonviolent praxis.'[18] Gandhi's commitment to *satyagraha* was a commitment to a liberative truth (*swaraj* - the freedom of India) that was both absolute and relative. Fully, absolutely, committed to the truth of human equality and the need for Indian independence, Gandhi nevertheless did not violently force his views on the British; rather he respected them, embraced them, tried to affirm them and learn from them. He was as absolutely resistant as he was absolutely open to co-operate where he could.

So in our liberative dialogues, we are fully committed to the truth as we see it; we witness eagerly we resist resolutely; but we never do violence, either physical or psychological or cultural; that means we treat the other person as a valued partner from whom we can learn, even when she/he is an opponent. Non-violence is a paradox of both strength and weakness, of resisting and bending, of a relationship with truth and with others that is both absolute and relative.

Conclusion

So, to the postmodernists who warn that to propose global responsibility as the common ground of dialogue is either impossible or exploitative, my response is a version of the old scholastic dictum: *ab esse ad posse valet illatio* - from fact one can conclude to possibility. If the kind of dialogue I have suggested - one that turns around the hermeneutical circle in a movement of compassion, conversion, collaboration, and comprehension is acceptable to members of differing religious communities, if it not only can be, but also already is, being practised in a non-violent way of assessing and blending our difference into a common effort for greater eco-human well-being, then we can recognize such a globally responsible dialogue as not only possible and necessary, but also as productive to both global and religious renewal. Much of what I'm calling a 'fact,' is, 1 admit, still a *hope*.

Notes

1. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1987, p.23; Gustavo Gutierrez, 1973, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973, p. II.
2. Dermot Lane, 'David Tracy and the Debate about Praxis,' in W G Jeanrond and J L Rike, eds., *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, pp. 34f. See also Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 23.
3. Samuel Rayan, 'Religions, Salvation, Mission,' in Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, eds., *Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, pp. 130, 139.
4. Michael Amaladoss, 'Liberation as an Interreligious Project,' in Felix Wilfred, ed., *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1992), p. 166.
5. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God*, New York: Crossroad 1990, pp. 5f.
6. Ibid. p. 83.
7. John Gort, 'Liberative Ecumenism: Gateway to the Sharing of Religious Experience Today,' *Mission Studies*, 8 (1991) 73.

8. Michael Rodrigo, 'Buddhism and Christianity: Towards the Human Future, *Logos*, (Sri Lanka) 27 (1988), 19-29. As has so often happened in Latin America, Fr. Rodrigo, who had spent his last years in organizing such BHC's in the villages of Sri Lanka, threatened those in power. He was assassinated while saying Mass in November 1987. See *Father Mike: The Prophet and Martyr*, Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1989.
9. Felix Wilfred, 1986.'Sunset in the East? The Asian Realities Challenging the Church and Its Laity Today', Federation of Asian Bishops Conference Papers, No. 45, July 1986, pp. 50, 53.
10. Aloysius Pieris, 'Jesus and Buddha: Mediators of Liberation' in J Hick & P F Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1987, p. 175.
11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* University of Notre Dame Press 1988.
12. Miroslav Volf, 'Justice, Exclusion, Difference.' Paper delivered at the Concillium Conference, 'Ecumenism and Justice. Toward the Twenty-First Century', Princeton Theological Seminary, May 23 1994, p. 4.
13. Miroslav Volf, 'Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of "Ethnic Cleansing", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 29 (1992) 230-48.
14. Volf, 'Justice, Exclusion, Difference,' p. 9.
15. Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture,' in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* , New York: Meridian 1961, pp. 197-227
16. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* , New York: Routledge 1992.
17. Volf, 'Justice, Exclusion, Difference', p. 8.
18. David Krieger, 'Conversion: On the Possibility of Global Thinking in an Age of Particularism,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 58 (1990) 229.